BILLINGS GAZETTE

Scanners muted as city agencies switch to digital radio system

January 24, 2013
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http://billingsgazette.com/news/local/scanners-muted-as-city-agencies-switch-to-digital-radio-system/article_7f95dd88-d67d-5c81-bb34-a2e31574b498.html#ixzz2Ivv78DPl

On Tuesday last week, the familiar crackle of radio traffic and the chatter of Billings police officers and local dispatchers on scanners across the city went silent, and it's not coming back.

At least not to the old analog scanners that have been used for years by local agencies to communicate and by interested citizens to monitor activities of city agencies, including the the police and fire departments.

After about two years of work and partially in response to a 9-year-old federal mandate, the city switched all of its radio communications to a state-of-the-art digital signal and system.

Ray See holds a Radio Shack digital scanner Wednesday as he talks about the city's switch to digital radios.

"We had to make a move, get a new system, or we wouldn't have anything," said Police Chief Rich St. John.

Anne Kindness, manager of the Billings City/County Emergency Communications Center, said the old system had been in use for almost 15 years and was obsolete.

The new system, which took a little more than year to put in place, allows for better communication between agencies, including with the Yellowstone County Sheriff's Office, which remains on an analog system with digital capabilities and lets them talk in areas that didn't get service before.

"You want your departments within the city to be able to communicate with each other as easily as possible," Kindness said. "We've created a system that better meets the need."

While city employees use the frequencies to communicate, media outlets for years have used portable scanners to track breaking news events and report them quickly. Other members of the public just like to listen to what's going on around town.

With the switch to digital, the public can't pick up the signals without expensive upgrades or new digital equipment, although certain calls — such as those to fire and emergency medical services — are rebroadcast through the old signals.

There's also a possibility that the public safety channels, mainly for police, will be encrypted to prevent unauthorized parties from listening.

St. John said he has recommended that the city encrypt all police channels, which would block the general public from using scanners to follow police activity. He said the recommendation stems from safety concerns for officers if criminals listen in on scanners and use that information.

"We're very, very concerned with officer safety," he said. "People are getting real-time information on what we're doing. If you're of the criminal element, it's very useful to know when we are dispatched and when we arrive."

He cited the shooting death of 29-year-old Michael Brandon at a downtown hotel last year as an example. During the incident, an acquaintance of Brandon was listening to police traffic using a scanner app on a cell phone. It's likely that person was then passing that information along to Brandon, St. John said.

While St. John made the recommendation, the decision on encryption will be made by City Administrator Tina Volek, and she said it won't come until at least next week.

She said she understands the public desire to access the channels but also agrees with St. John's concerns over officer safety. Volek hopes to hold meetings next week to discuss the available options, including broadcasting with no encryption and how to provide information to the public if she approves police encryption.

"I became aware of this issue late last week and it is obviously a huge concern," she said. "That's something that will have to be addressed soon."

The city paid about $2.2 million for the new system, but it could have cost much more.

In 2010, a group helping the city look into switching out its communications called GeoCommunications told the city that such a swap would cost around $9 million, with annual maintenance costing 10 to 15 percent of that, but that federal funding was often available.

The study was done in response to a 2004 Federal Communications Commission mandate that required a switch to narrowband signals, either analog or digital, by Jan. 1, 2013.

When the federal government cut much of that funding, it left the city looking for a new source of cash. That came when the FCC said Sprint-Nextel could use part of the 800-MHz spectrum already owned by the city, but that it would have to pay for it.

In January 2011, the city received $2.5 million in new radios, about 840 units, as part of the deal and Sprint covered other related expenses as well.

"It took all of the old radios that we had and replaced them with models that were new," Volek said.

With the old system well past its 10-year shelf life and on the verge of no longer being supported, the city began to bid out the job of replacing it. Kindness described the city's process there as "a claim to innovation" because it bundled the three elements — a digital radio system, a 911 system and a logging recorder — together as one bid.

Cassidian Communications, a European communications giant looking to get into the American market, came in with the winning bid of a little more than $2.2 million for all three.

"It was unheard of, a request on bundled services like that," Kindness said. "But we wanted a solution that allows us to use those brand new systems in the best, most cost-effective way."

Since the new system came online last week, there haven't been any major issues, but Kindness said they're still working out some of the bugs, thanks in part to a Cassidian team that can monitor it remotely from Texas.

It is also compatible with a statewide infrastructure that will support both analog and digital radios and is connected by a digital microwave system.

While they're working through the bugs of the new system, she said it's already proving to be an improvement.

"It's very clear," Kindness said. "We used to have difficulty in parts of the community and that's not an issue any more. We weren't expecting that."